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Reflections from the field

Applying a proposal guideline in mentoring English major undergraduate researchers in Taiwan

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Abstract

Many colleges and universities in Taiwan have implemented research courses into the school curriculum in an effort to meet the demands of higher education and requirements of graduation. However, not many researchers have proposed a guideline in mentoring English major undergraduates in their research proposal writing in Taiwan. Furthermore, to date few publications exist that could guide mentors on how to mentor undergraduates during the research writing proposal process. The purpose of this study is to share a proposal mentoring guideline that was used for mentoring undergraduate researchers.

Key Words: Mentor, mentoring, research proposal, research writing

Introduction

Many non-native English speaking professors in Taiwan have found that writing a research paper for their own work in the English language is not an easy task. However, mentoring undergraduates' English proposal writing can be even harder and more time-consuming. Jensen et al. (2004) declare that "many faculty members believe editing documents for spelling, grammar, a specific writing format style, and scientific writing style is not their responsibility; consequently, papers are read with only content and data analysis in mind" (p. 44).

Furthermore, there do not seem to be publications written in the Chinese language that teaches teachers how to mentor undergraduates in the process of writing a research proposal. Students find they are having to rely on Everhart's (1994) book on research to assist their writing, including choosing a topic, doing library research, writing an outline, taking notes, writing a rough draft, and editing and polishing the final paper. While there seems to be some procedural instruction, there is a gap between the procedure and what Taiwanese students need.

Only the research done by Kuo & Chiu (2009) seems to be solely dedicated to mentoring undergraduates' research writing in the situation of universities in Taiwan. Therefore, the goal of this article is to help teachers who teach research writing to develop their own proposal mentoring guideline to assist students in completing a research proposal.

Literature Review

The role of a mentor and mentor and mentee relationships are found in the existing literature and discussed below.

Who is a mentor?

Maack and Passet (1994) report that a mentor could be someone who assists junior staff members who are struggling with their first positions as post-doctoral academics, still trying to manage their careers, learning how to write and publish and how to prepare for tenure within higher education (as cited in Sengupta & Leung, 2002). Kuo & Chiu (2009) define research mentors as instructors who “have individual conferences and meetings with students outside the class to discuss questions and problems that students were unable to resolve or clarify in the class. Specifically, instructors have to spend a great deal of time helping students to overcome all the possible challenges they encounter during the research writing process.” (p. 2)

What makes a good mentor?

According to Cramer and Prentice-Dunn (2007), an effective mentor is someone who is aware of the issues college students encounter. As for the participants in Rose’s (2003) study, their ideal mentor is someone who communicates openly, clearly, and effectively and provides honest, good and bad feedback about their work. The role of mentoring thus involves open communication, effective feedback, and helping the student grow in the new process. Interestingly, for international students in Ku et al’s (2008) study, an effective mentor is one who does research together with students. Daily interaction and mentoring foster students’ enthusiasm for research and are more likely to promote collaborative research in the future (Yarnal and Neff, 2007). Mentor relationships between faculty and doctoral students encourage collegiality and mutual responsibility for learning (Gibson & Bannerman, 1997). To keep in touch with professors, Cobb et al. (2006) suggest use of e-mail, which students perceive as less invasive than phone calls or office visits. Mentors who interact with students help them achieve autonomy, and a sense of competence and mutual respect (Bruce, 1995). Similarly, Cramer and Prentice-Dunn (2007) pointed out that when faculty makes students visible in the department and on campus, it helps them to know the students better.

Ishiyama (2007) compared Caucasian and Africa American student expectations and perceptions of undergraduate research mentoring and she found that Caucasian students tend to describe a good mentor as ‘expert in the field’ while African American students describe a good mentor as being personally concerned with the students’ welfare. A student cited by Ishiyama (2007) expressed that he or she likes a mentor to ask him or her how his or her life is going. Similarly, foreign doctoral students in Rose’s (2005) study also preferred having a mentor who is interpersonally involved in their lives. Doctoral students in the Cobb et al. (2006) study said that mentors should help them to adapt to their new identities and roles and to navigate them through the dark and unfamiliar doctoral process.

However, like Cramer and Prentice-Dunn (2007) shared in their study, it is not easy to attract motivated and skilled mentors, who are under pressure to publish research, participate in service and teach effectively, to mentor undergraduates. As Rose (2003) pointed out, the prospect of finding a mentor can be complex and intimidating, particularly for new graduate students. This

author would say it is not easy to find mentors for undergraduates too.

Mentor and Mentee Relationship

It is well-documented in the literature that the mentor-mentee relationship is important in the undergraduate and doctoral student research writing experience and process. For example, student psychologists cited problems with doctoral committees or advisors as a major reason for doctoral students failing to complete their dissertations (Jacks et al., 1993). Similarly, graduate students from a prestigious university in Manis et al (1993) survey of the quality of graduate experiences reported that lack of adequate mentoring or advice is one of the most frequently cited sources of delay in completing the degree. Seventeen undergraduates in the Falconer and Holcomb (2008) study indicated that their interaction with their mentors was vital in their overall writing experiences at a summer student research programme.

Additionally, the main advisor was found to play a significant role in the academic life, satisfaction and career preparation of African American doctoral students in the Holland (1993) study. The quality of interaction with the faculty mentor is also central to students' ultimate satisfaction within the doctoral experience, especially in mentoring minority Mexican American, and American Indian doctoral students (Williamson and Fenske, 1992). Similarly, in a study that examined the relationships between African American doctoral students and their major advisors, Paglis et al. (2006) surveyed 357 doctoral students during the first three weeks of their first semester of doctoral training in the United States. Surprisingly, they found that interacting with a faculty mentor may have a negative effect on their attitudes about their career choices. Their study indicates that exposure to the reality of a professor's life during graduate study actually turns some students away from pursuing a research-oriented academic career.

However, Bean et al. (2004) conducted a case study on a mentor and a mentee relationship and their findings indicated that the mentor in the study had a different point of view toward the mentor and mentee relationship. The mentor asserted that she will collaborate and mentor her mentee, but she would not step forward to provide all the support and directions her mentee needed. She believed students have to do it on their own and they have to learn where to look for answers. In addition, doctoral students and the major advisors' interactions could be 'business-like' (Holland, 1993).

Research Background

This author has mentored 81 undergraduate students writing research proposals in Taiwan. I conduct surveys once or twice per semester to gather information on my students' experience during the proposal writing stage. The students have challenges in how to narrow down a topic, writing English literature reviews from Chinese sources and choosing appropriate research methods.

Students are asked in the survey to share the assistance they wish to have during their proposal writing stage. Narrowing down a topic was the most frequently reported challenge. In addition, analyzing the data, method selection and writing literature reviews are also mentioned. In the case of a literature review in English, students have difficulties understanding technical terminology which hinders writing summaries and critical comments. Lastly, students also have problems in organizing literature into logical order and suitable categories. In addition, students

mention some minor needs such as receiving feedback on focused writing and helping with grammatical issues.

Students who have no previous experience in information search for research writing found the librarian's tutorial helpful. In view of the challenge in research writing for the first time college researchers and mentors, I developed a proposal mentoring guideline for mentoring undergraduates which I have found to be of help with mentoring undergraduates with their research proposals. After all, even doctoral students have advisors as guides to mentor their dissertation processes and they frequently discover themselves uncertain in the research processes (Di Pierro, 2007).

Proposal Mentoring Guideline

The author developed a proposal mentoring guideline which was used when mentoring non-native speakers of English undergraduates in Taiwan. I will now explain how this guideline works. The guideline focuses on choosing a topic, forming a research question, writing an eye-catching abstract, producing a literature review with critical thinking, and selecting proper methodology and method.

First, the majority of my students indicated they would like mentors to provide more detailed instructions to help them narrow down a topic to a manageable scope. It is important for mentors to emphasize the fact to students that they are not doing a master's thesis or doctoral dissertation. Students should not choose an unrealistic topic that might take them too long to finish. Furthermore, encouraging students to stick with their topics is also important. If mentors find students' research topics or titles not to be on the right track, they can guide students by asking them to indicate clearly, descriptively, and succinctly what their papers are about.

The research question is the most critical element. The suggested guidelines include thinking about how to solve the problem in the topic, writing out the key research idea in a sentence, and finalizing the research question. To help students form the research question, an easy way is to ask students to brainstorm what they would want to find out the most in their research. The research questions will determine the type of the research method students will use and who will be research participants. As a result, mentors and students need to be sure that the research questions are feasible and accessible, and can be completed within the given time. Or following Fernando and Hulse-Killacky (2006), mentors can use an invert triangle visual to help students develop a dissertation research question. This visual uses specific steps for students to follow. The first step focuses on what they want to know. The second step targets the goals of their research. This is followed by a literature review to find out what has been or has not been reported in the literature. Finally, students analyse how the research will make a contribution to the relevant professional fields.

Looking at the abstract is another challenge. If a student's abstract is too short or too long mentors could have a conversation with the student about the purpose of an abstract. Students can take notes of this conversation which can help them make the necessary amendments.

Searching relevant literature and comprehending the main idea within it by taking notes and quotes, writing summaries, and categorizing themes can be a challenging task. When students report they have difficulties finding relevant literature, mentors may provide some relevant

literature to review. Giving alternative key words for searching on databases might also be useful and mentors can recommend several relevant websites, databases and search engines. If necessary, mentors can help students to search the literature together in front of a computer. Students can then be encouraged to show mentors what they have found and highlighted during their literature review writing process to ensure they are on the right track.

In the literature review writing stage, students need to learn to organize English sources in logical order and suitable categories. Meanwhile, mentors need to remind students not to plagiarise. To non-native English speakers, paraphrasing in accurate, grammatical, and fluent English is the most difficult part in research writing. Shirley (2004) pointed out that many students understand how to summarize literature, yet sometimes entire blocks of quotations appear in their essays. Shirley emphasized the importance of teaching students what paraphrasing is, and how to paraphrase in their own research-based papers.

It is also very helpful to teach students how to organize their references in alphabetical order. Mentors could teach students how to cite their references following the APA (American Psychological Association) format, the chosen referencing style at my university. Mentors can post several APA citation guidelines on the school e-course platform for students' reference if it is available.

To better assist students' English writing, mentors can teach students to write down good sentence structures while reading the literature. Mentors can use the research article sample from the assigned textbook or handouts they prepare to guide students to identify and highlight good sentence structures.

Last, I want to highlight the methodology and method selection process. Mentors need to help the student choose a suitable research methodology that fits the research question and select specific research methods to collect data. The research question should determine the type of the research method that can be used and who participates in the research, not the student's preference or expertise. If mentors lack expertise in either qualitative or quantitative research methods, they can invite professional researchers to come and lecture their students and answer questions on methods and methodology.

Conclusion

Many students perceive writing research proposals as an ordeal but often struggle in silence (Di Pierro, 2007). However, Guterman (2007) emphasized that undergraduates learn and grow significantly from their research experience if they have a strong bond relationship with mentors. To create the bond, I believe the proposal mentoring guideline I provide can assist mentors to teach undergraduates how to narrow down a topic, form research questions, write literature reviews in English and select a method in research proposal writing process. However, I hope this article motivates mentors to develop their own proposal mentoring guideline to assist undergraduate researchers.

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